

Senator gets first-hand look at NOAA's work

Mikulski's new appointment could bring more funds to organization

by Meredith Hooker
Staff Writer

On Monday afternoon, the tiny blue crabs were in a water-filled tank in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's science center, but when they're larger, they'll be in the Chesapeake Bay.

The crabs were on display at NOAA's downtown Silver Spring headquarters to show U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) of Baltimore the work the agency has been doing, particularly involving improvements to crab harvests and oyster reseedling in the Chesapeake Bay.

Mikulski was recently named ranking member — or senior Democrat — on the Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations subcommittee, which is responsible for funding NOAA. And though President George W. Bush's budget cuts funding for NOAA by about 8 percent, Mikulski said she hopes to increase NOAA's funding by working with the president on priorities that involve NOAA and then seeking approval for other projects. NOAA, which employs more than 4,000 people in Maryland, distributes information around the country.

Mikulski said she particularly hopes to increase funding for NOAA's work on oyster reseedling and improving crab harvests because having more oysters and crabs means a healthier Chesapeake Bay, and means saving industries that rely on the marine life for business.

Last year, NOAA received about \$4 million in federal funds for its work with oysters and blue crabs. This year, they're looking to get about \$10 million, said Paul Carliner, minority staff director for the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The crabs are bred in labs and then taken out to the bay, said Lowell Bahner, director of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay office.

NOAA also is restoring oysters by uncovering or planting oyster shells in areas of the bay that were once productive, then seeding those shells with young oysters.

"We need our oysters," Mikulski said.

But harvesting blue crabs and restoring oysters in the Chesapeake are just two of the many projects at NOAA. The agency does real-time observation of the bay and other waterways with sensors to determine currents and tide and to prevent ships in transit from running aground. There are air resources that help determine how wind transmits pollution, air quality and when windstorms might arise.

NOAA also is able to track how that pollution affects bodies of water, including the Chesapeake. On Monday, using a diorama of Maryland, officials sprayed the miniature state with water and showed how it turned brown and rolled toward the tiny Chesapeake.

NOAA is also working to restore



Susan Whitney-Wikerson/The Gazette

Retired Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher (far left), administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, looks on Monday as U.S. Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D) of Baltimore watches Lowell Bahner, NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office director, simulate the effect rainfall on dirty pavement has on the bay ecosystem at NOAA in Silver Spring.

sea grass in the bay, said Stephanie Hunt of NOAA's restoration center. The sea grass provides a home for some fish and will allow for more blue crabs. Sea grass also oxygenates the water.

The grass and work NOAA is doing will allow for "oysters and crabs, and also a clean bay," Mikulski said.

There is a satellite center operated in Suitland that produces images about every five minutes to be used for forecasting and environmental monitoring. The satellites also are used by other federal agencies. NOAA is also using its equipment to expand its tsunami prediction and warning capabilities, ultimately creating a global warning system.

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